

The Church's Foundation

Acts 1:1-3

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We're starting a series going through the book of Acts. Right at the beginning of Acts, we get the sense that we're coming in on the middle of a story. Acts is a "sequel" to the Gospel of Luke. Reading the first few verses of Luke and Acts, we see that they're addressed to the same person (Theophilus). Acts 1:1 refers to the author's first volume.

So we're joining a story already in progress. It's continuing what started in Luke's Gospel. And Luke sets his Gospel in the ongoing story of what God was doing in Israel and the world. So Acts is an exciting chapter in the story of God's activity.

J. B. Phillips was a pastor in England during World War II. He found that many of the young people in his church didn't understand the Bible, so he started translating it into modern English. He eventually published *The New Testament in Modern English*. It was a favorite paraphrase for many years. Phillips started with Acts. He called it *The Young Church in Action*. He said that translating Acts was like wiring a house with the electricity turned on. I pray that as we move through Acts, we'll get a "jolt"; we'll experience the power of the Holy Spirit that the earliest Jesus followers knew.

Luke writes for someone named Theophilus. That was a fairly common name at the time and it can mean "lover of God" or "loved by God." Luke wants to instruct and encourage Theophilus and the Christian community he was part of. Luke seeks to strengthen their faith, and ours, by reminding us about the basic story of the gospel and how it spread into the world through the earliest followers of Jesus. Theophilus' faith, and ours, has its roots in historical events and facts. There are some basic elements in the Christian story, in what we believe and preach and teach. We'll see various summaries of basic Christian preaching and teaching throughout Acts. But several of the basics are here in the first three verses.

Someone has said that these first three verses of Acts contain seven "pillars" of Christianity (Jim Buskirk cites E. Stanley Jones on this). They are basic elements of what Christians believe and proclaim. They're the

foundation we build on and they support the structure of Christian faith and life.

The seven pillars or basic matters or core issues in Acts 1:1-3 are:

- all that Jesus began to do and to teach
- he was taken up to heaven
- the Holy Spirit
- the apostles he had chosen
- his suffering
- many convincing proofs that he was alive
- the kingdom of God

I want to examine each of these briefly. It's good to be reminded that there are some essential aspects of our faith. Christian faith is not just a good feeling—though it involves our emotions. It's not simply relational—though relationships with God and each other are certainly vital to it. Christian faith also has a certain intellectual content that affects and involves our minds. We do need to remember that faith isn't purely intellectual—it engages our emotions, it's relational, it influences our decision-making, and it's to be lived, not just thought about.

But as we focus on this aspect of faith, we realize that in our discipleship, as our initial faith seeks understanding and grows, we learn more about the Christian faith. In our relationship with God in Christ we want to know more about God and the story of what God has done in Christ. In any relationship, you want to know the other person's story. You want to know things about that person. A lot of what's going on in the Bible is telling the story of the God we relate to.

Today, we're focusing on a basic outline of that story, the core of the content. The New Testament includes several summaries of this basic material: the confession "Jesus is Lord," sermons and speeches in Acts, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 1 Timothy 3:16.

In the years following the time of the NT, the early church summarized basic Christian belief in creeds like the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds. It's interesting how many of the elements Luke mentions

in Acts 1:1-3 are in the Creed, especially in the section about Jesus. The Creed mentions all seven of our “pillars” except for the kingdom of God.

Now let’s look at each of these elements in Acts and see how they relate to us.

All that Jesus began to do and to teach. This is a reference to the Gospel of Luke, which records the story of Jesus from his birth to his ascension. In Acts 10:38, Peter sums up the ministry of Jesus when he refers to “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”

God’s incarnation in Jesus and the life and ministry of Jesus are basic to Christian belief. The stories of Jesus’ ministry—his preaching, teaching, and healing—are essential for Christian understanding. The gospel stories nourish us as we grow in faith.

It’s interesting that Luke refers to the gospel record as all that Jesus *began* to do and teach. He implies that Jesus continues doing and teaching. And he does. The book of Acts is the record of Jesus’ continuing work through the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. “All that Jesus began to do and to teach” doesn’t stop with the ascension; it continues in the new community, the church. The last scene of Acts shows the apostle Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ (28:31) (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts* Abingdon New Testament Commentaries). Acts doesn’t really end; it just sort of stops without concluding.

So Acts is the story of the early church. It’s also a book about Jesus—he’s the principal actor. Acts is also like a play where we’re invited to become actors ourselves. The stage opens up and we find we’re in the middle of the action. That’s the point of the ending that’s not really an ending. The story continues and we’re part of it! “We need to refresh our minds as to how the opening scenes worked so that we can play our parts properly, ‘in character,’ in line with the inner nature of the unfolding drama” (N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*).

He was taken up to heaven. This refers to the ascension of Jesus. Luke records this event at the end of his Gospel and here in Acts 1. It's both the dramatic finale of Jesus' earthly ministry and the opening of the church's ministry.

The ascension is an affirmation of Jesus by God the Father. Not only did God raise Jesus from the dead, but he also took him up to the place of highest honor. Jesus is the exalted Son of God and Lord of all. The ascension also includes the promise that Jesus will appear again—he will return (v 11).

In the meantime, the ascension includes the promise of God's presence and power with us now. At Pentecost, as a result of Christ's being exalted, his life and power are given to the disciples through the Holy Spirit. When things go badly for Theophilus and his church, when the world falls apart, when things come loose and chaos threatens, it's good to know who's in charge, who rules. "'God Has Gone Up,' not gone away from the church but gone up to be the empowerment for the church" (Will Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*).

During the forty days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he continued teaching and instructing his apostles *through the Holy Spirit*. Just as during his earthly ministry, Jesus continued teaching with divine power and authority.

This is the first of four references to the Holy Spirit in this chapter. And the whole book could be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." Through the Holy Spirit in the church, Jesus continues the work he began in the Incarnation. The Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of Jesus in and with his people.

The Holy Spirit is not an option we may or may not add to our experience of Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus real to us now. The Holy Spirit is how we know Jesus. We don't have personal knowledge and experience of Jesus apart from the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, Jesus' work doesn't continue. Without the Spirit, we see Jesus as just an "echo of history" and not a "present reality" (Michael Card, "Know You in the Now" on *Present Reality*, 1988).

But because God gives us the Holy Spirit, the same power available to Jesus and the first disciples is available to us. Jesus, as the risen Lord, through the Spirit is able to do now what he did in his earthly ministry. He can do even more because he can indwell and empower all of us personally.

A friend of mine once said that the early church wasn't on fire because of the freshness of their *memory* of Jesus. They were on fire because of the freshness of their *relationship with Jesus*. Through the Holy Spirit, we can have the same kind of relationship with Jesus the earliest church had.

Jesus' instructions were given to *the apostles he had chosen*. This originally referred to the Twelve Apostles who, with Jesus as the cornerstone, are part of the church's foundation. We call the church "apostolic" to affirm that our roots are in the New Testament and that what we believe is consistent with what the apostles taught. Talking about the apostolic faith also reminds us that eyewitnesses to the events shared the story. Later in Acts, believers devote themselves to the apostles' teaching (2:42). That's the faith we claim and affirm. "Apostolic" also has a fuller, ongoing meaning—it speaks of the church as a community in mission. We are called by Jesus, gathered and empowered by him, and sent out by him in mission and ministry.

Luke refers to Jesus' *suffering* or his *passion*. The suffering of Jesus began in the manger, but this is talking primarily about his crucifixion and death. Any account of the Christian faith needs to include the fact that Jesus suffered rejection, pain, and death for us. We need to know why he suffered. Jesus, the Righteous One, was rejected by people whose unrighteousness made him unbearable to them. And God used human schemes to accomplish his purpose. Jesus died on our behalf, in our place—to provide forgiveness of sins, to reconcile us to God, to show God's love for us, to pay our debt, to return us to God.

But Jesus' suffering and death is not the end of the story. He showed himself alive to his disciples and gave *many convincing proofs that he was alive*. Everything Luke believes and writes is based on the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection of Jesus there wouldn't be a church. We wouldn't have new life in Christ or a faith to hold and proclaim.

But Jesus is alive. His tomb is empty. God raised him from the dead. Looking at the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the Gospels, we see that the women who came to Jesus' tomb that first Sunday had a triple confirmation of his resurrection. The angel announced that Jesus had risen just as he said he would; they saw the empty tomb; and they touched the risen Jesus. We base our faith and witness on the same triple confirmation. Jesus announced many times that he would rise; his tomb was empty on the third day; and he appeared repeatedly to his earliest disciples physically alive. "To this threefold testimony about his bodily resurrection we add our own testimony about his spiritual presence in our lives. He has risen from the dead!" (John Hiigel, *Partnering with the King* 269).

The earliest disciples were convinced that God had raised Jesus from the dead. If they hadn't been convinced of that, the events described in Acts wouldn't have happened. But Jesus, who was crucified, is alive. And his transformed body is the beginning of God's new creation. "The resurrection of Jesus who died under the weight of the world's evil is the foundation of the new world, God's new world, whose opening scenes Luke is describing" (Wright, *Acts for Everyone*).

An African evangelist was witnessing to a tribal chief. As he spoke about Jesus' resurrection, the chief said that he had known at least five people who had come back from the dead. The evangelist asked, "Well, chief, are these five people still alive?" The chief replied, "As a matter of fact, they are all now dead."

"Sir, I have come to tell you of One who was dead, is alive and is alive forevermore!" (Eddie Fox and George Morris, *Faith-Sharing* 24-25).

The last pillar Luke mentions here is *the kingdom of God*. This was Jesus' theme throughout his ministry. He preached that the kingdom was near, at hand, available. He taught about the kingdom and illustrated its

nature in his parables. He demonstrated the presence and power of the kingdom in his miracles.

The kingdom of God is God's rule—God's dynamic, active, and powerful reign. Most people in Jesus' day saw the kingdom of God as a distant hope. But in Jesus the future invaded the present. Jesus brought the reality of the kingdom into this age. The kingdom will be finally fulfilled when Jesus returns. Until then, as Jesus continues his work by the Spirit in the church, the kingdom's influence extends and grows. We don't build the kingdom of God. We receive God's kingdom and we bring the kingdom's character and resources to bear on the world.

As participants in the movement of the Kingdom, we are to allow the Lord to reign supreme in all our affairs and to discover and implement the implications of his teaching in every facet of life. (Lloyd Ogilvie, *The Drumbeat of Love* 15)

Jesus, who lived and taught about God's kingdom, who suffered and died, is alive and exalted. And he is here—in the Holy Spirit's presence. He is here teaching us and calling us to live as his people, under his rule, in the power of his Spirit. He wants his work to continue today. He's chosen to work through the church, through people, through you and me. Will we yield to him as our king? Will we make ourselves available for him to work in and through us?